

## Stay positive to get an edge

In my last article I wrote about how good preparation before the start of play can help with overcoming opening round nerves. However, nerves are not the only aspect which might affect a bridge player's ability to focus effectively. Keeping a positive mindset when faced with a difficult contract is an important mental skill to possess.

Consider this hand where South became declarer in four hearts after West made a pre-emptive diamond bid over South's short club opening.

Dealer: East

Vulnerable: N-S

	♠ 102	
	♥ A543	
	♦ 10	
	♣ AQJ754	
♠ J763		♠ Q54
♥ 87		♥ KQ10
♦ KQ6543		♦ 987
♣ 3		♣ K1098
	♠ AK98	
	♥ J962	
	♦ AJ2	
	♣ 62	

With such poor hearts, and the king of clubs possibly off-side it would be easy to be pessimistic about this hand. When faced with a problem like this a player's anxiety level will often rise as questions about how to make the contract arise. Some players will become negative about the contract with thoughts entering the mind about the possibility of going off in a vulnerable game and taking a poor score back to one's team-mates. With this anxiety and doubt influencing their thoughts, a player's concentration and focus will be adversely impacted. A player with this negative mindset may struggle to think clearly and bring their focus effectively back to the problem at hand.

Players with good mental skills will remain positive despite being faced with a difficult contract. They will focus properly and consider their options and the line of play required rather than being negative or tentative about the circumstance in which they have found themselves. To be successful, a player's thought process must be focussed on what needs to happen for the contract to make, rather than be pre-occupied with negative thoughts on how difficult the contract might appear. Focussing like this will lead to the realisation that it is possible to make the contract even if the club king is offside and even with such poor trumps.

Learning how to refocus when your thoughts have turned negative is a mental skill worth acquiring. This starts by recognising when your self-talk has turned negative. Phrases like "what a stupid bid partner made", or "why did I make a game try here", or "we are behind in the match and if I don't make this we are going to get smashed" are a good sign that your thoughts have taken a negative turn. To refocus, start by taking a few deep breaths to relax and change your self-talk from the negative (this contract is terrible) to positive (what do I need to do to make this contract). Using a word like "focus" will also help remind you to focus on the task at hand—what is the best line—rather

than the outcome which hasn't happened yet. Presenting a calm and confident persona to the opponents even when faced with a difficult contract will also assist with achieving the desired outcome. After all, the opponents may be facing their own self-doubt and help you out with a difficult contract!

When this hand came up in Melbourne's 2018 Victor Champion Cup teams which featured over 90 entries, more than half the field, including some very strong players failed in four hearts on a variety of leads. I was declarer in four hearts and found my way home after the lead of the king of diamonds, although the contract is arguably more difficult on the singleton club lead. Our teammates were with the field in setting four hearts. Sitting South I won the opening lead with the ace and ruffed a diamond, returning to hand with a spade to the ace I ruffed another diamond, and returned to hand with a spade to the king leaving this end position:

	♠ -	
	♥ A5	
	♦ -	
	♣ AQJ754	
♠ J7		♠ Q
♥ 87		♥ KQ10
♦ 654		♦
♣ 3		♣ K1098
	♠ 98	
	♥ J962	
	♦	
	♣ 62	

Two lines will succeed from here – the first (the line I took) is to play a club to the ace and exit with the queen. If East now tries to give partner a club ruff, South simply has to play a high trump ruff a spade exit a high club ruffing high and the contract is made. The second less obvious line is to give up a spade to the queen effectively endplaying East. On the lead of a club from West, South has to win the first trick with the ace and continue with essentially the same line.

A variety of factors may have influenced the outcome on this board at the various tables where declarer was unsuccessful. These factors could include tiredness, a problem which occurred on a previous board which still preyed on the mind of declarer, the current placing of the team, or the skill level of the players. It could just be that it was a difficult contract, and sometimes we just take the wrong line. However, despite all these factors, there is no doubt that a player who approaches a board like this with a positive mindset will be more likely to succeed, than one who is beset by negative thoughts.

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© First published in Australian Bridge. October 2018.

